America and I Study Guide

America and I by Anzia Yezierska

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Introduction

Anzia Yezierska, known as the "Queen of the Ghetto" or "The Immigrant Cinderella," became a literary sensation in 1920 after the publication of her first volume of short stories, *Hungry Hearts.* Despite this instant celebrity, her career was erratic: her work had fallen out of popular favor by the 1930s, but she had a resurgence in 1950, with publication of the autobiographical *Red Ribbon on a White Horse.* Almost thirty years after Yezierska's death, Alice Kessler-Harris reintroduced her to the English-speaking public when she published *The Open Cage: An Anzia Yezierska Collection.*

"America and I," originally appearing in 1923 in *Children of Loneliness,* is one of three autobiographical articles in the book. While all of Yezierska's work takes as its most important theme the immigrant' s creation of her place in America, in "America and I," she addresses these issues in a more direct manner. Her difficulties are multifold: not only must she learn to communicate with Americans, she must convince them that she has something worthy to say. Yezierska's experiences also take on a deeper, more universal meaning; in sharing the hard road to fulfillment of her creative goals, Yezierska chronicles the challenges that face all aspiring writers.

Author Biography

Yezierska was born circa October 19, 1885, in Plinsk, a town on the Russian-Polish border. Around 1892, the family immigrated to the United States, where they settled among other Eastern European Jewish immigrants in New York City's Lower East Side. Yezierska worked in a sweatshop and at other menial jobs during the day. In the evenings, she went to school to learn to read and write English.

At some point, she came to the attention of a group of German-Jewish women who helped immigrant girls obtain an education. With their help, she won a scholarship to study domestic science at Columbia University. She earned her certificate to teach in 1904 but found that she disliked this career.

After a brief marriage that was subsequently annulled, Yezierska married again and had a daughter in 1912. However, discovering that she was not suited to married life, she moved to California with her daughter in 1915. Unable to support the two of them, she sent her child back East and focused her attention on writing.

Her literary career was launched with the publication of the story "Free Vacation House" in *Forum* in December 1915. Two years later, she met the philosopher and social scientist John Dewey, who guided her intellectual development.

Recognition came to Yezierska in 1920, when her story "The Fat of the Land" was included in *The Best Short Stories of 1919.* A collection of short stories, *Hungry Hearts,* was also published that year, and Samuel Goldwyn, the movie producer, bought the rights to it. Yezierska became an instant celebrity. She moved to California for a second time, but realizing that she could not write away from home, she returned to New York within the year.

In the 1920s, Yezierska published several novels and short story collections. *Bread Givers* (1925), an autobiographical novel about an immigrant girl's struggles with her father, was her best fictional piece of the period, earning her critical acclaim. By the end of the decade, however, interest in Yezierska's work had waned.

From 1929 to 1930, Yezierska held a fellowship at the University of Wisconsin, which allowed her to continue writing despite her poor economic circumstance. However, the American readership remained uninterested, and Yezierska returned to New York in 1932, poor and in need of work. In the mid-1930s, she began to work with the Federal Writers Project, which was a New Deal program. She continued to write but did not publish anything until 1950, when her autobiographical novel *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* came out. This book was well received, and Yezierska wrote short stories and book reviews until her death. She died of a stroke in Ontario, California, on November 21, 1970. Yezierska was rediscovered in the 1970s. A new edition of the long-out-of-print *Bread Givers* came out in 1975 as well as several volumes of her collected fiction and essays.

Plot Summary

In "America and I," Yezierska recalls her experiences finding work that expresses her creativity and thus the America of her dreams. She comes to the United States with hopes of building a new life, the kind of life that she and her ancestors were unable to achieve in Russia. She believes that in America, freed from the need to work constantly just to survive, she will have time to voice her creative self-expression.

She soon discovers she is mistaken. Unable to speak English and with no job skills or training, she is forced to work as a maid for an Americanized Russian family. Although they will not tell her how much she will be paid, she works hard for the family, grateful to have the chance to live with Americans and start to learn English. She also looks forward to receiving her first month's wages so she can buy new clothes and look like an American herself. The family, however, makes no move to pay her. When Yezierska asks them for her wages, they tell her that she should be paying them for the opportunities they are giving her; without knowing English, she is worthless. Yezierska leaves the family immediately, without a penny and having lost her trust for any Americanized immigrants.

Yezierska returns to the Lower East Side, where the Jewish immigrants live. She gets a job at a sweatshop sewing on buttons. She only makes enough money to live in a room that she shares with a dozen other immigrants. She is always hungry, but she likes this job better than working for the family because she has her evenings to herself. When the shop gets busier, however, Yezierska is asked to work longer hours. Eventually, she complains, which gets her fired.

This employment experience, however, allows her to get a job in a regular factory. She has more free time and better pay, but she still feels discontented because she does not speak English well enough. She begins to attend an English class at the factory and confides to the teacher her desire to work with her head and her thoughts, not her hands. The teacher tells her that learning the language will solve her problem, so after Yezierska has mastered reading and writing English, she approaches her teacher again. She follows the teacher's advice of joining a social club run by American women to help immigrant girls. The Women's Association holds a lecture about how to be a happy, efficient worker. However, Yezierska questions how she can be happy when she is not working at a job she loves. The next evening, she goes to see a counselor at a vocational center and tells the woman that she wants a job that will allow her to express her creativity. The counselor advises her to become a shirtwaist designer. Yezierska begins to think that the America of her dreams—the America of self-expression— does not exist.

Frustrated, Yezierska begins to read about American history and the country's first settlements. She realizes that as the Pilgrims had to create a new world, so must she. Unlike the Pilgrims, when confronted with adversity, she has always lost heart and faith in America. She has the epiphany that America is not a finished product but rather a world that is still being created. As a newcomer to America, she too can contribute to the

country's development. She decides to write about the life that she and her fellow immigrants experience in America. In doing this, she finds a job she loves and the America she has been seeking. At the same time that she revels in her success, she cannot help but feel sympathy for all the other immigrants who have been unable to achieve their dreams in America.

Summary

"America and I" is Anzia Yezierska's short essay about her struggles with assimilation into her new country and the activation of her emerging talent as a writer.

The author notes that she is one of millions of people who have entered America with the hopes and dreams of a fresh, new life. From the perspective of her homeland, Russia, America represents the Promised Land and "wings for my stifled spirit." Anzia hopes to be able to create a life much different from the one experienced by her parents. She wants to create and love her work instead of being driven only by hunger and basic needs.

Anzia quickly realizes that although she is in America, she is not of America, separated by her heritage and language barriers. Anzia finds work at the home of a Russian family who has been in America for a while and has become quite successful. Anzia works as a domestic for the family, who will not define Anzia's wages but provide a home and food for the girl.

Anzia is happy to learn American ways and language in the household, but at the end of her first month, she begins to anticipate the clothes that she will be able to purchase with the wages she knows are imminent. Buying new clothes will allow Anzia to literally divest herself of her Russian persona and speed up her Americanization process.

Anzia is crushed when the family reveals that it does not intend to pay her a wage and that she should be paying them in gratitude for the opportunity they have provided her. Anzia leaves the household immediately, vowing to never again trust any American family.

Anzia ends up in the Jewish Ghetto in New York City, where she works sewing on buttons in a sweatshop. The wages are meager, and Anzia can barely buy food and pay for a mattress to sleep on. At least she knows that the evenings belong to her, and she can go to the roof of the tenement building at night and dream about a better life.

The workload in the factory increases significantly, and Anzia resents the extra hours she is expected to work for payment of only a glass of tea and a herring sandwich. One day, Anzia makes the mistake of declaring that she prefers her evenings alone to the tea and sandwich and is fired from her job.

Anzia is alone and hungry once more, but she resolutely pushes on to her dream of a better life and to one day being treated fairly as if she were an American. Before long, Anzia secures a job in a better factory, where she works only eight hours each day with evenings and Sundays off to spend as she pleases.

Anzia is also able to buy better food and live in a nicer place. She can even buy some American clothes, but she is still unsatisfied. Anzia realizes that her lack of English

language capabilities will continue to prevent her from becoming Americanized, and she attends an English class for foreigners held at the factory.

Anzia shares her frustrations of not being able to communicate her thoughts and feelings to her instructor, who advises Anzia to stay the course and learn English, which will be the solution to the problem. Meanwhile the tedious work is breaking Anzia's spirit, and she once again approaches her English instructor for advice.

Anzia's instructor suggests that Anzia join the Women's Association for some social and personal growth, but Anzia is disappointed at the first meeting, which is a lecture about workers being happy with their work. Anzia does not understand how anyone can be happy with the tedious factory work available to the immigrants and yearns to find work where she can utilize her creativity and urges to communicate.

The next night, Anzia meets with another counselor at a vocational guidance center, who advises Anzia to employ her creativity in her current work of making shirtwaists by becoming a clothing designer. Anzia's frustration grows as the woman can only see methods for Anzia to make more money in her current work area, not explore the options that will provide fulfillment for Anzia's soul too.

Anzia faces the disillusionment that perhaps America is not about working your dreams but merely working to make more money. Anzia has become proficient in the English language, but she feels that there are still no words to communicate the depths of longing in her Russian soul.

In Anzia's attempt to understand the chasm between herself and natural born Americans, she studies American history and is encouraged by the stories of the Pilgrims who also came to America from another land. Anzia realizes that the main difference between the Pilgrims and herself is that the Pilgrims came to this land with the expectation that they would have to build their own world, while Anzia expected that her new life would be ready made and waiting for her.

Anzia also determines that the Pilgrims forged their new life armed only with fortitude and perseverance and that she needs to adopt the same attitude. Anzia understands now that the hope of America is that it is still unfinished and that she can become a pilgrim of sorts and forge the life that she wants instead of relying on others to show her how to do it.

Fueled by this revelation, Anzia decides to write about the Jewish people in the Ghetto in an attempt to share her world, which will open up more opportunities for herself and others like her. Anzia's new pleasure is tinged with guilt and sadness as she despairs for the people who must toil in tedious work while she now delights in her writing.

Analysis

As an essay, Yezierska's piece is told from the first person point of view, which means that the reader knows everything that the author experiences, both factual activities and thoughts and feelings.

One of the techniques used by the author is the insertion of her natural dialect and culture. When Yezierska is frustrated and disillusioned, she inserts the characteristically Jewish retorts "Oi-weh" and "Ach," which makes the tone of the writing almost conversational, as if the author is speaking with the reader.

Yezierska uses beautiful imagery in the essay, using the techniques of metaphors and similes. For example, at the beginning of the piece, Yezierska speaks of the oppressive life in Russia and how the idea of America represents "wings for my stifled spirit - sunlight burning through my darkness - freedom singing to me in my prison - deathless songs tuning prison bars into strings of a beautiful violin."

Obviously, spirits cannot have wings, and prison bars cannot be used as violin strings. These metaphors, though, provide a lyricism that reflects the author's deepest longings while exhibiting her gift of visually presenting concepts that go beyond the mere statement of facts.

At the time this essay was published in 1920, America was in the throes of a massive immigration movement. Yezierska herself was one of these immigrants and experienced first hand the poverty and discrimination experienced by those who came to America at this time. The author struggles not only with her Russian heritage but also with her role in the emergence of women's rights at this time.

In the end, though, Yezierska finds her place in her writing, and yet she feels compassion for those who have not yet been fortunate enough to find happiness. There is a sense of hopefulness, in that the author works to share the world of the Jewish people in New York so that the walls of alienation may be brought down and replaced by understanding and compassion.

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Characters

Americanized Man

Yezierska's first job is with an Americanized family who originally came from the same town as she did. The man and his wife both chastise Yezierska for speaking to them of her wages and refuse to pay her.

Americanized Woman

Like her husband, the Americanized woman belittles Yezierska when she speaks to them of her wages. She tells Yezierska that working for them is like a summer vacation.

English Teacher

Yezierska takes a class at the factory where she works. She confides to her teacher her desire to work with her head, but the teacher treats her like a child and says she needs to learn English first. When Yezierska approaches the teacher again after she has learned to read and write English, the teacher advises her to join a social club run by American women to help young immigrants.

Sweatshop Owner

Yezierska's second job in America is working in a Lower East Side sweatshop. The old woman who runs the shop demands that the women work longer hours. When Yezierska eventually complains, she throws her out of the shop.

Vocational Counselor

Yezierska visits a vocational counselor so she can find out what kind of job will allow her to express the way she feels inside. The counselor, unable to understand what Yezierska wants, advises her to design shirtwaists instead of sewing them. She tells Yezierska that she must rise from job to job slowly and then she will earn more money. The counselor emphasizes the economic aspects of a job over personal fulfillment.

Anzia Yezierska

Yezierska narrates "America and I." She first arrives in the United States filled with optimism about the fulfillment of her creative needs. In America, she will be valued for her thoughts and ideas, not for the work that her hands can perform. When she discovers that few such opportunities are available to her and that she will have to fight

to be heard, she questions what America really is and what it means to her. Despite many disappointing experiences, she holds on to her determination to become a writer. Through self-analysis and perseverance, she is able to create a realistic definition of America and to find a place for herself within its culture. At the same time, she achieves her longed-for dream of doing the work she loves: writing.

Themes

Poverty

Yezierska describes the impoverished circumstances in which the immigrants in New York find themselves. People such as Yezierska came to America to escape such poverty; in Russia, they had to work all the time simply to survive. America, the land of opportunity, is supposed to be much different, but Yezierska finds this is not the case. She works long hours in a sweatshop but still earns only enough money to provide herself the barest of sustenance. When she loses that job, she has nothing to fall back on and is "driven out to cold and hunger" in the streets.

Yezierska experiences another, equally devastating sort of poverty: poverty of the soul. Unable to express her creativity, Yezierska feels something within her "like the hunger in the heart that never gets food." To Yezierska, feeding the soul is as important as feeding the body; a person who works solely for survival is a slave, whereas a creator is a human being. She craves a job that will allow her to share her inner thoughts and feelings. By becoming a writer, Yezierska is able to fulfill her physical and emotional needs and to work her way out of the impoverishment that continues to entrap so many of her fellow immigrants.

Immigration and Cultural Diversity

Throughout its history, the United States has drawn immigrants from around the world with its promise of freedom from religious, political, and economic persecution. From its earliest settlements in the late 1500s and early 1600s, people have come to America seeking a new life. The French and the Dutch first came to North America to earn money from trade. The Pilgrims came to present-day Massachusetts to find the freedom to practice their religion. Other early English settlers were drawn by the promise of obtaining their own land. For example, the state of Georgia was chartered in 1732 as a colony where poor English citizens, such as those who had been jailed for debt, could start a new life.

The generation of immigrants of which Yezierska was a part is no exception. Yezierska and people like her came to escape a country where they were discriminated against socially and economically because of their religion. These immigrants brought to America different ideas and traditions, which Yezierska was eager to share in her new country. In "America and I," she speaks of the "Russian soul" as an entity remarkably different from that of the soul of any other ethnicity. The essence that defines Yezierska arose from a background incomprehensible to the people she meets in New York, a background based on discrimination and drudgery, on fear of sudden violence, and on a system of erratic injustice. In Russia, Jewish people had no choice to become what they really wanted to be. In Yezierska, the "hidden sap of centuries would find release; colors that never saw light— songs that died unvoiced—romance that never had a chance to

blossom in the black light of the Old World." Yezierska recognizes that the Americans do not understand her feelings; however, she comes to realize that by writing about the plight of the immigrant, she can share with them something of her culture. Through her writing, Yezierska helps to bridge that gap and helps to shape the ever-changing culture of America.

Charity

In the early 1900s, many charitable institutions had formed to help immigrants acclimate to their new lives and assimilate into American culture. In many instances, the cultural groups themselves formed organizations that would provide such services. In "America and I," Yezierska receives aid from organizations created solely by Americans. She learns to read and write English through a class offered at the factory where she is employed. She attends a lecture sponsored by the Women's Association. She visits the Association's Vocational-Guidance Center. However, how much these charities benefit Yezierska is suspect. The Americans who try to help her find her path in America do not understand her hopes and dreams; all their advice is practical and geared toward sustaining a person's physical body, not a person's emotional well-being. When Yezierska tells the guidance counselor that she wants to let out her creative spirit, the counselor responds with a suggestion focusing on how Yezierska should design shirtwaists instead of sewing them, which will earn her more money. For a time, Yezierska feels that America owes her something. "American gives free bread and rent to criminals in prison. They got grand houses with sunshine, fresh air, doctors and teachers, even for the crazy ones. Why don't they have free boarding-schools for immigrants—strong people—willing people?" she asks the counselor. However, Yezierska comes to realize that she needs to rely on herself— not charitable associations, Americanized immigrants, or employers. Once she starts to do so, she is able to achieve her dreams and to find America in helping to create it.

Style

Autobiographical Essay

"America and I" is one of three autobiographical pieces that Yezierska included in *Children of Loneliness.* All of these pieces explore the immigrant's preconceived notions about America, the inevitable disappointment, and finally the reconciliation of illusions and reality, which leads to the creation of a pragmatic, more helpful way of looking at life in this new country. In "America and I," Yezierska finds her own version of America. She introduces herself—and the story—by announcing that she represents all those "dumb, voiceless ones" who cannot speak for themselves. Yezierska presents her own experiences of arrival in a new country: the search for work, the inability to communicate, the feelings of not being welcomed. She delves into the transformation that she underwent emotionally during this period, as she comes to realize that America is not the people she meets or simply a country that can fulfill anyone's dream but rather a constantly-changing concept, one that she can help create. As such, Yezierska's autobiographical piece takes on a more universal meaning; it speaks not only for Eastern European Jewish immigrants like herself but for any person who has moved away from home and wants to assimilate into that new culture, yet enhance it.

Point of View

As befits an autobiographical essay, Yezierska narrates "America and I" from the first person point of view. Yezierska shares with the reader all the thoughts and feelings she goes through during the course of the story. This point of view gives the reader a more personal connection with the author. For example, because Yezierska explains the hopes that she held for America before her arrival, the reader is able to understand the true depth of her disappointment and disillusionment.

However, because the first person point of view is a limited one, "America and I" does not present a cohesive, objective view of immigrant life. For example, in writing about the sweatshop where she works, Yezierska focuses on her own relationship with the owner and her response to the woman's attempts to manipulate the workers. Aside from the detail that the sweatshop is located in a dark basement, she does not provide a composite that would help the reader see the reality of the sweatshop, such as the unsafe, unhealthy working conditions that characterized such places.

Language and Imagery

As some critics pointed out upon the initial publication of *Children of Loneliness* in 1923, Yezierska's language tends to the exaggerated, even overwrought. The opening of "America and I" supports this contention to a very real degree; in one long sentence, Yezierska references the "airless oppression of Russia," her own "stifled spirit" and darkness, and the Promised Land with its ability to turn such despair into the "strings of

a beautiful violin." However, the imagery upon which Yezierska relies suggests that such use of language stems from her own passionate response to coming to America and the power of her aspirations for her new life. When narrating her hopes for herself in America, she returns over and over again to images of flames, fire, and light; even sunlight is described as "burning though my darkness." These words represent Yezierska's belief that America can transform her life and her own ardent longing for this to happen.

Historical Context

Immigrants in the 1900s

Between 1891 and 1910, around twelve million immigrants arrived in the United States. Unlike the wave of immigrants the United States had seen in the mid-1800s, the majority of these so-called new immigrants came from countries in southern or eastern Europe. Most of the Jewish families fled their homelands to escape religious or political persecution, whereas other immigrants sought improved economic opportunities.

Millions of immigrants first set foot on American soil on Ellis Island in New York Harbor. Hundreds of thousands then settled in New York City, where they often lived in slums and crowded, unhealthy apartments. Slum streets were often piled high with garbage and raw sewage, and the slums usually were located right next to polluted industrial areas.

The life of immigrants in the United States was filled with other hardships. They often were only able to obtain low-paying, unskilled jobs. Some worked as many as fifteen hours a day simply to support their families. Education was seen as the key to improving these circumstances, so many adult immigrants attended English classes at night; children often attended public schools. The children of immigrants often became Americanized more quickly than their parents, speaking English and adopting American habits.

Jewish Immigrants in New York City

Most Jews in New York City settled in the Lower East Side, which developed into a thriving community filled with Jewish stores and services. Immigrants could buy kosher meats and other Jewish delicacies, attend a Jewish theater that gave performances in Yiddish, and read a newspaper published in Yiddish. Many Jews faced discrimination; for example, some employers refused to hire Jews. Some Jewish immigrants responded by trying to assimilate into American culture. Among other measures, they adopted American clothing or worked on the Sabbath (Saturday). Other Jews, however, clung to the traditions of their former life, particularly their religious rituals and their habits of spending the majority of time studying the Torah, which is the first five books of the Old Testament.

Urban Reform in the 1910s and 1920s

As the cities became increasingly crowded, city officials found themselves unable to keep up with demands for housing and social services. As a result, thousands of families lived in unsafe, unsanitary conditions. The drive to reform the cities began in the early 1900s, and these problems were addressed in a number of ways. For example, New York passed a law in 1901 that greatly improved new tenement buildings.

Other reformers led a campaign to provide children with safe places to play, and by 1920 cities had spent millions of dollars building playgrounds. A city-planning movement also grew with the goal of halting the spread of slums and beautifying the city. City planners controlled and regulated city growth, created safer building codes, and developed public parkland. Civil engineers improved city transportation and paved the streets. Sanitation engineers worked on solving the problems of water supply, waste disposal, and pollution.

Women in the 1920s

During the 1920s, the so-called New Woman appeared. No longer believing that marriage and family was the ultimate goal in her life, many women asserted their independence and challenged traditional ways of looking at their roles and behaviors. Some women became reformers or sought to gain entry into the work world. Many women simply enjoyed the personal freedoms changing social roles brought them, for example, exchanging restrictive Victorian garments for looser-fitting, more casual clothing and cutting their hair.

Critical Overview

Published in the 1923 collection *Children of Loneliness,* "America and I" is one of three autobiographical essays through which Yezierska relates aspects of the immigrant experience. This book includes pieces that reiterate the author's major themes of the conflicts between the Old World and the New World, and the desire to be a crucial part of America.

Despite such fundamental similarities to 1920s *Hungry Hearts,* which helped drive Yezierska's early success, this volume drew less attention. Many Jewish critics reproved Yezierska for her rendering of immigrant speech patterns, which they felt made immigrants sound ignorant. Several mainstream critics commented on Yezierska's lack of self-control in her writing. "[H]er emotion tends to become emotionalism, to run away with her instead of being under firm control," wrote Dorothy Scarborough in the *Literary Review.* The critic for the *Springfield Republican* also commented that the work was at times "incoherent and reckless in its lack of restraint." Despite this characteristic, the critic believed that overall the volume "rings true." Similarly, the *New York Times* noted the book's frequent "slips into melodrama" but concluded that the book has "a value because of the vivid picture it gives of life on the east side, among the immigrants, their hopes and fears and way of looking at thing[s]."

Critics for the *Times Literary Supplement* (London) and the *Literary Digest International Book Review,* by contrast, had unreserved praise for *Children of Loneliness.* Wrote William Lyon Phelps in the *Literary Digest International Book Review,* "[L]ong before she had attained . . . mastery of the English language . . . there was in her work a core of fire." The writer for the *Times Literary Supplement* (London) posited different paths the immigrant in America might take: he may be absorbed, or undergo Americanization, thus losing his soul, or he may not be absorbed, in which case he will lose everything except his soul. However, there is one more alternative: "he may be absorbed and yet in rare cases save his soul actively and devote it to realizing his dream in the service of America. . . . This is what has happened to Anzia Yezierska." The writer further comments on how *Children of Loneliness* demonstrates the crucial lesson that Yezierska has learnt in America: "there is a thing more terrible than the hunger for bread —the hunger for people . . . [and] a burning desire for self-expression in art or literature"—a theme that particularly applies to "America and I."

The *New York Times* writer specifically singled out Yezierska's nonfiction pieces as "the most interesting portion of the volume." According to this critic, Yezierska's writing skill lies in her ability to portray the people and life that she knows— the life of the tenements. "Her gift is not creative," reads the review: "she is a reporter and an autobiographist rather than a fiction writer."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, Korb explores the development of Yezierska's concept of America and her fulfillment of her creative goals.

In a *Literary Digest* issue from 1923, Yezierska shared her view of America as "a new world in the making, that anyone who has something real in him can find a way to contribute himself in this new world." At the same time, she noted, "But I saw I had to wait for my chance to give what I had to give, with the same life and death earnestness with which a man fights for his bread." That same year, her third published work, *Children of Loneliness* (a novella with ten short stories and three autobiographical pieces), came out. "America and I," one of those autobiographical pieces, describes the experiences that Yezierska went through that led to the development of this philosophy. This piece aptly fits Alice Kessler-Harris's description of Yezierska's mission, "to interpret her people to America," which she writes about in the introduction to *The Open Cage,* a 1979 reissue of some of Yezierska's work.

Yezierska relates her immigrant plight, from her first arrival in this "golden land of flowing opportunity" to her current success as a writer with the gift of introducing her people to their adopted culture. As an eager newcomer, Yezierska has grand dreams of what she will find in America; to Yezierska and the millions of immigrants like her, America stands in marked contrast to Russia. The Old World chokes its people with "airless oppression," but America brings sunlight to this darkness. In the Old World, Yezierska and her people have no opportunity for economic betterment, but in America they can escape "from the dead drudgery for bread." Yezierska's soul and spirit were "stifled" in the Old World, but in America, Yezierska can revel in her ability to give voice to her own forms of self-expression. "For the first time in America, I'd cease to be a slave of the belly," Yezierska recalls how she felt at the time. "I'd be a creator, a giver, a human being."

Yezierska sees her inability to communicate as the major obstacle standing in the way of her dreams. Although she is in America, she is pushed to the outskirts of American society because she has "No speech, no common language, no way to win a smile of understanding from them." Once she is able to speak the language, Yezierska is confident that the Americans would want to hear about "the richness" in her. When an "Americanized" immigrant family offers to hire her as a maid, she moves in with them, hoping this will allow her to "begin my life in the sunshine, after my long darkness." To Yezierska, this couple, "so well-dressed, so well-fed," seem symbolic of the transformative success that America can bring.

As the narrative style underscores, Yezierska glorifies everything American: the "music of the American language," American words, "new American things," "an American dress and hat." She is "so grateful to mingle with the American people" at the house where she works as a maid that she "never knew tiredness." While living there, Yezierska comes to perceive herself as an American on the inside, for example

"developing American eyes" with which to look at the world. All she needs—or so she thinks—is American clothing to cover up her immigrant heritage. With new clothes, "I'd show them I could look like an American in a day." She is still filled with optimism; she does not comprehend that merely possessing the outward trappings of an American will not make her one.

Through her experience with the family, however, Yezierska comes to learn a bitter lesson: being "American" does not make something good. The family cheats her out of her wages, leaving Yezierska with nothing to show for a month's hard work other than a new distrust of so-called "Americans." However, Yezierska's narrative also shows her understanding that it is the man and woman who label themselves as such. They are not American-born, actually coming from Yezierska's own village in Russia. They only *want* to be American because of the economic opportunities it provides, such as the comfortable home and the nourishing food—as well as the chance to feel superior to other newer immigrants. This family so embraces their adopted country that they are even "ashamed to remember their mother tongue." Yezierska's reiteration of the word *"American"* implies that this family does not really represent America. Their self-portrayal of themselves as such is as fleeting as the "false friendship" they offered Yezierska. In turning her back on them, Yezierska is not turning her back on America at all.

Holding on to her belief in the concept of America and determining to search anew, Yezierska returns to the slums of New York, where her people have settled. She finds a job that she might have held in Russia—sewing buttons in a sweatshop—a job that affords her only the bare minimum of sustenance. The outward circumstances that face Yezierska make her wonder, " 'Where is America? Is there an America?'" Yezierska begins to question what before had been her profound faith.

As time goes by, Yezierska moves her way up in the industrial world, going to work for a factory and maintaining a regular schedule with Sundays off. Still, she continues to hold fast to the belief that her America will be the place where can "work for love and not for a living." When she tries to take steps in this direction, however, the native Americans she meets seem intent on making her aware of the folly of this philosophy. In her efforts to better herself and to fulfill her creative dreams, Yezierska seeks out assistance, but the first person to whom she turns has no comprehension of the depth of her feelings. When she confides to her English teacher, "I want to do something with my head, my feelings," the woman advises her that she first worry about learning the language and then "patted me as if I was not yet grown up."

The teacher does tell her about the Women's Association, which Yezierska visits. This organization has the ostensible purpose of "trying to help the working-girl find herself," but instead it coordinates activities that promote the needs and success of employers. Yezierska attends a lecture "The Happy Worker and His Work," which is sponsored by the association. The lecturer extols efficiency in the factory worker at the same time he asserts, "It's economy for the boss to make the worker happy." Equating what makes the worker happy with her own vision of what would make her happy— expressing her thoughts and feelings through her writing—Yezierska believes these words apply to her.

However, this lecture, filled with "educated language that was over my head," offers Yezierska nothing except for false hope.

Yezierska's next step toward achieving her goal is to go to the Vocational-Guidance Center, where she explains to the counselor that her job sewing shirtwaists makes her heart "waste away." She describes her major problem as "I think and think, and my thoughts can't come out." To this plaint, the counselor replies with an answer focused on economic achievement, not personal fulfillment: "Why don't you think out your thoughts in shirtwaists? You could learn to be a designer. Earn more money." The counselor cannot understand Yezierska's yearning to do more with herself than merely earn a living. More strikingly, as illustrated by her words "You have to *show* that you have something special for America before America has need of you," the counselor does not even believe that Yezierska yet has a right to aspire to more than being a menial worker. Her admonishment seems to tell Yezierska—and all immigrants—not to hold goals surrounding intellectual, philosophical, artistic, or creative pursuits, but instead to focus only on pragmatic ones. The counselor would feed the body while stifling the soul.

Frustrated, Yezierska comes to feel that "the America of my dreams never was and never could be." However, in letting go of her vision of America as a Utopia, Yezierska opens herself up to finding out what America really can be for her. By reading American history, she takes the important first step of rethinking her concept of America, and subsequently revamping it. America, she realizes, does not owe her the opportunities she seeks, but she must fight for them herself. Yezierska must emulate the Pilgrims who "made no demands on anybody, but on their own indomitable spirit of persistence." Yezierska also realizes that not only is she erring in "forever begging a crumb of sympathy," she is also doing so from the Americans— "strangers who could not understand."

Yezierska experiences her life-altering epiphany when she comes to realize that America is "a world still in the making." She can contribute to the ongoing creation of the country through the expression of her inner thoughts and feelings. In writing about the life of the immigrants, her achievement is two-fold: she finds the America of her dreams, but she also widens the perception of the country for the native born by "open[ing] up my life and the lives of my people to them." The "bridge of understanding" that Yezierska works to build with words can only expand and improve American-born and immigrant readers' ideas about the country they call home.

At the same time, particularly because she understands the role of *all* Americans in inventing the country, she feels sadness that so many immigrants "with my longing, my burning eagerness, to do and to be, [are] wasting their days in drudgery they hate." These people are losing out on the opportunity to fulfill their own dreams, and "America is losing all that richness of the soul." In these sentiments, Yezierska asserts her belief that people— even those who the American mainstream would ignore—have their unique gifts to offer and can thus shape the world in which they live.

"America and I" ends on the positive vision that Yezierska holds for the future of the country. She writes, "the America that is every day nearer coming to be, will be too wise,

too open-hearted, too friendly-handed, to let the least lastcomer at their gates knock in vain with his gifts unwanted." Whether Yezierska's prophecy has come true is not for her to determine: it is for the individual, who may even decide to embrace self-expression as a further means of shaping the ever-unfolding world.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "America and I," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Covintree is a graduate of Randolph-Macon Women's College with a degree in English. In this essay, Covintree discusses the immigrant experience as expressed through Yezierska's short story.

First published in 1922, Anzia Yezierska's short story "America and I" touches on many of the issues and themes common in all her work, including the struggle of the immigrant to be a part of the promise of America. This is the story of a young female narrator who comes to America with a dream and a desire to make something of herself. She has many expectations of what she will be able to become when she arrives, but instead she is immediately introduced to the base reality of America and its treatment of the immigrant community. This is a story of the struggle of assimilation, of the challenges faced by an outsider trying to become part of the mainstream culture. In an ideal situation, aspects of both cultures begin to blend, and a variant of the main culture becomes primary. In this case, the narrator is in the minority group,—"one of the millions of immigrants"—of Jews from Eastern Europe, who are fighting to be heard in their new country and culture. Neither culture knows quite how to respond to the other.

Yezierska's narrator comes to America

[with a] soul pregnant with the unlived lives of generations clamoring for expression. What [her] mother and father and their mother and father never had a chance to give out in Russia, [she] would give out in America.

She believes that America is a place that will welcome her as an individual with ideas and passions that can make her and America flourish. She expects America to feed her soul, "I'd cease to be a slave of the belly. I'd be a creator, a giver, a human being!" What she finds, though, is that her expectations of the American dream fall short because she is an immigrant girl who enters a country without adequate money, clothing, training, or language skills. In addition, she longs to discover a way to make her dreams come true, a way to reinvent herself as a real American.

The narrator left Russia because she believed there was nothing for her there: she came to America with the desire to give of herself, without any knowledge of how to translate her passionate desire into something that would provide food and shelter and money. Her passions are not enough to sustain her, and she, like so many other immigrants, accepts a menial position as a maid for a family from the Old World who appear to have assimilated to this New World.

She takes this position with comfort, believing herself to be "in the hands of American friends, invited to share with them their home, their plenty, their happiness." With this job, she expects to learn the language and have money for clothes. She believes her vision of America is in sight. She works tirelessly for them, absorbing what she can about her new country, only to discover they will not pay her for her work. Though providing room and board, these Old World connections do not help the narrator in

fulfilling her American dream. In fact, they demean her and shame her for even believing that she is entitled to her own time and her own wages. For the narrator, this is a betrayal. "It went black for my eyes," she says. Her one American connection is soured, as are her feelings toward immigrants who become Americanized: "It was blotted out in my all trust in friendship from 'Americans.'"

This Americanized family becomes an example of one way immigrants choose to blend with their new culture, by almost dismissing their very origin. "[T]hey were so well fed, so successful in America, that they were ashamed to remember their mother tongue." As the husband and wife rise in wealth and stature, they have no qualms about taking advantage of a former neighbor by denying her wages and thereby a means to create a respectable place for herself in America. Perhaps this couple rose to their current status through such basic labor, or perhaps they had been a part of this new culture long enough that they felt entitled to make those who came after them struggle to survive. Whatever the reasons, Yezierska chooses not to explain them. She merely demonstrates, through this couple's callous nature towards the narrator, one reality of this New World.

This was a culture that did not and would not accept all the ways of the Old World, especially one immediately visible—dress. As Yezierska's narrator states from the beginning, she longs for new clothes so that she can appear American. The narrator believes, like many other immigrant Jews of the time, that American clothing held with it what Christopher Okonkwo described in his article "Of Repression, Assertion, and the Speakerly Dress" as "transfigurative potential." With American clothes, the narrator could suddenly transform herself from an immigrant into an American. "Jews were compelled to discard that sartorial part of their ethnic identity in order to be accepted in America," according to Okonkwo. But of course, before Yezierska's narrator can buy these alternative clothes, she must work in the very shops that make them.

When she takes factory jobs, she begins to see the reality of the garment industry. Initially, the narrator believes these jobs allow her opportunity to pursue her own dreams and that even her defiance of their bribes is a sign of her assimilation to America. However, like the Americanized family before, she discovers her bosses have other motives. They bribe her with "tea [and] herring over black bread" and English classes only to keep her working in their factory. They are motivated by greed and will use whatever means to gain their profit. Yezierska's narrator cannot reconcile this motive for herself. Gaining the means to buy her American clothes does not quiet her longing to be American. Looking the part does not satisfy "the hunger in the heart that never gets food." She can sense her own soul seeping away. As Ron Ebest cites in his article " Anzia Yezierska and the Popular Debate Over the Jews ": "The dead work with my hands was killing me. My work left only hard stones on my heart." It is as though she must trade her penniless dreaming for the financial reality of factory work which "stifles . . . expression." Yezierska's narrator has dreams that she does not want to trade, and she struggles to maintain them, to live in the new country based on her expectations, not the harsh reality she encounters.

The reality is Yezierska's America keeps the immigrant at a distance. This American culture is unwilling to accept or incorporate foreign ways. As Ebest goes on to say in his article: "Yezierska suggest[s] a casual relationship between American indifference [to the Jewish immigrants] and sweatshop labor." America abdicated any real responsibility for the narrator. The industry takes no interest in her passions nor her skills unless they can improve productivity. In the factory, with a regular American work schedule of eight-hour work days and five-day work weeks, the young woman at the Vocational-Guidance Center tells her: "You have to show that you have something special for America before America has need of you." What skills she has gained in the factories do not show she is something special. They show she is a typical immigrant who will get no special privileges. The guidance counselor explains the American dream as "earn[ing] your living at what you know and ris[ing] slowly from job to job." This is the reality she discovers, a lifetime of factory labor. It turns her dream into "a shadow . . . a chimera of lunatics and crazy immigrants."

When faced with this reality, Yezierska' s narrator discovers a greater reality: no matter what clothes she wears or how well she speaks, she will always be an immigrant because America "could not understand what the Russian soul in me wanted." The narrator has followed all the channels she knows, and still she is forced to remain "one of the dumb . . . beating out their hearts at [America's] gates for a breath of understanding." This is the true struggle of assimilation for the immigrant, to find a way to make the dominant culture discover the true value and talents of the non-native so that he or she can be seen as an equal in the community, not just a slave laborer. The narrator wants to be heard, to "be a creator, a giver, a human being." Without language, the voice of the immigrant cannot speak and the New World appears deaf.

However, when the narrator learns English, commonality still cannot be achieved. Throughout the story, the narrator tries to share her dream of "living joy of fullest self expression." Each time she shares her dreams with America, she is rebuked, dismissed, and shamed into feeling grateful for her place in America. "You should be glad we keep you here." Even with common language, the narrator is silenced and must find her voice in some other way.

Yezierska emphasizes the New World's oppressive silence of the immigrant by never naming the narrator. In this way, this nameless character represents America's insensitivity to the immigrant. Americans can perhaps listen to the story of struggle but cannot relate it to a real person living in their own America. They can step back from the nameless stranger and remove themselves from the struggle. In the same respect, though, the narrator becomes the Everyman for all foreigners who bring their dreams to American shores. This story of longing and silence becomes their story. Persons who feel unable to find their place in American culture can hear their own voice in the cries of the narrator. As the narrator speaks, she tells of the "burning eagerness" waiting inside so many other voiceless immigrants.

It is in telling the story that Yezierska's narrator finally finds her voice and also fulfills her dream to be a part of America. This appears to take place for Yezierska's narrator after she researches American history and comes to the conclusion that Americans survived

because of their own "indomitable spirit of persistence." She also concludes that all of her dreaming about being a part of America was really just her "begging for a crumb of sympathy." Suddenly she is enlightened and sees that she has a place in "the making of America like those Pilgrims who came in the *Mayflower.*" The narrator finds her voice in sharing her immigrant story and finds that by doing so she is able to "build a bridge of understanding between the American-born and [her]self." Through writing, she discovers a means of joining her new American culture while still maintaining her immigrant heritage.

Her writing is her voice and her fulfillment of her American dream. "In only writing about the Ghetto I found America." She can use her own experience as an outsider clamoring to get in as a guide for other immigrants, and for America. With her story comes the exposure of the reality that "America is losing the richness of the soul." It is the narrator's hope that such exposure becomes an agent of change. This is her future vision of successful assimilation. Her hope for the immigrants is that they persevere long enough to share their gifts. For the Americans, she hopes they open their arms, ready to fully take in these immigrant treasures. In this new America, dreams of the future are not dashed and dismissed by the realities of the present.

Source: Kate Covintree, Critical Essay on "America and I," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Find out more about Yezierska's life. Then read *Bread Givers* or *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* and analyze these works from a biographical perspective.

Think about Yezierska's question "Where is America?" Write a personal response that you might share with Yezierska.

How complete is Yezierska's portrayal of immigrant life? Explain your answer.

Research political and societal conditions in Russia that caused so many Jews to immigrate to the United States.

Find out more about the New York immigrant's life in the early 1900s.

Yezierska has been criticized for her overwrought language and style. Analyze "America and I" from a stylistic point of view.

Comment of the last paragraph of the story. Do you think Yezierska's prophecy has come through? Explain your answer.

Compare and Contrast

1900s: By the beginning of the decade, more than two million children in the United States work in factories. Reformers persuade state legislatures to pass laws regulating child labor. Some states prohibit the employment of young children. Other states limit the employment of older children to eight to ten hours a day or bar them from working at night or in dangerous conditions. Still other states require that children obtain literacy before they are sent to work.

1920s: In the 1920s, children and adolescents generally enjoy more leisure time and less responsibility for family support. No major laws regarding child labor are passed, although reformers continue to be interested in the issue.

Today: All states require that children attend school, generally from age six to sixteen, and laws prevent children under the age of fourteen from working, with the exception of specific jobs. Many students work part-time, however. Fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds may be employed outside of school hours no more than three hours a day and eighteen hours a week when school is in session. There are no federal laws restricting the work hours of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds.

1900s: In 1900, forty percent of Americans live in urban areas. Only three American cities have populations greater than one million. The majority of American cities have populations between 50,000 and 100,000.

1920s: By 1920, for the first time in American history, more than half of all Americans live in urban areas.

Today: In 1990, just over seventy-five percent of Americans live in urban areas.

1900s: From 1900 to 1920, about 14.5 million people immigrate to the United States. The vast majority of immigrants come from Europe, particularly Austria-Hungary, Italy, and the former Soviet Union. The American population of people born in Europe stands at 8,882,000 in 1900.

1920s: From 1920 to 1930, just over four million people immigrate to the United States. Of these, close to 2.5 million come from Europe, particularly from Italy and Germany. The American population of people born in Europe stands at 11,916,000 in 1920.

Today: In the 1990s, just under seven million people immigrate to the United States. Of these, only about one million people are Europeans. The majority of immigrants come from Asia and Mexico. The American population of people born in Europe stands at 4,350,000 in 1990.

1900s: By the turn of the century, reformers, primarily women, are attempting to achieve women's suffrage at a state level. However, they have few early successes, and by

1901 only four states have given women full voting rights. In 1914, however, some reform groups are attempting to win women's suffrage on a national level.

1920s: The Nineteenth Amendment, which gives women the right to vote, is passed in 1919 and ratified the following year. The Equal Rights Amendment is first proposed to Congress in 1923 by Alice Paul, a leading member of the National Women's Party. Many people, including women, oppose this amendment because they fear it will make legislation protecting women workers unconstitutional, and the amendment fails to win political support.

Today: More and more women are holding public office, with numbers rising continually throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 1999, 1,664 women held offices in the state legislatures and sixty-five women served in Congress.

What Do I Read Next?

Yezierska's *Bread Givers: A Struggle between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New World* (1925) is the author's most fully realized fictional work. Based on events from her childhood, the novel explores the struggles that Sara goes through as she breaks free from her traditional Old World family to become an independent woman.

Red Ribbon on a White Horse is Yezierska's fictionalized autobiography. Yezierska published this work, to great acclaim, in 1950, when she was nearly seventy years old.

Call It Sleep (1934) is Henry Roth's highly praised novel about the experiences of Jewish immigrants in New York City. It focuses on a young boy, his difficult relationship with his father, and the squalid urban environment in which they live. Today, this novel is considered a classic of Jewish-American literature.

Chaim Potok, the son of Polish immigrants, was raised in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. His first novel, *The Chosen* (1967) tells the story of the son of a Hasidic rabbi who is encouraged to study secular subjects. His next novel, *The Promise* (1969), follows the same characters into young adulthood.

Betty Smith's A *Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943) chronicles the story of young Francie Nolan, growing up in a poor family in New York City in the early 1900s.

Sholem Asch's *Salvation* (1934) is the story of a Polish Jewish community in the 1800s. This book vividly recreates the persecution of the Jews.

"A Scrap of Time" and Other Stories (1987) collects Polish author Ida Fink's short fiction. These stories relate the experiences of Jews in Poland before and during the Holocaust.

Cecyle S. Neidle' s *America's Immigrant Women* (1976) discusses the contributions of women, including Yezierska's, to the development of the United States and its culture from the 1600s onward.

Jacob A. Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), documenting slum life in the late 1800s, exposed the foul conditions under which New York's urban poor were forced to exist. His perennially popular work contributed to the social reform movements that improved city life.

Abraham Cahan was a Jewish writer who came to the United States in 1882. His novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), one of the first books about the Jewish immigrant's experience, remains relevant for its vivid re-creation of life on New York's Lower East Side.

Further Study

Blumenthal, Shirley, *Coming to America: Immigrants from Eastern Europe,* Delacorte Press, 1981.

Covering the period from 1874 through 1924, the author traces the path of the immigrants from impoverished peasants in Eastern Europe to factory, mills, and mines in America.

Glazer, Nathan, *American Judaism,* University of Chicago Press, 1989.

First published in 1957, this current edition of this definitive work on the nature of Judaism in post-World War II America offers an updated introduction covering shifts in American Judaism since the 1970s.

Howe, Irving, *World of Our Fathers,* Galahad Books, 2001.

This is a noted historian's massive sociocultural history of the Russian Jews who immigrated to the United States between 1881 and 1921.

Inglehart, Babette, "Daughters of Loneliness: Anzia Yezierska and the Immigrant Woman Writer," in *Studies in American Jewish Literature,* Winter 1975, pp. 1—10.

This article discusses Yezierska's relation to her culture.

Meltzer, Milton, ed., *The Jewish Americans: A History in Their Own Words, 1650-1950,* Crowell, 1982.

This book synthesizes the experiences of Jewish Americans by presenting excerpts from such documents as letters, journals, diaries, autobiographies, and speeches.

Sachar, Howard, *A History of the Jews in America,* Knopf, 1992.

Sachar's comprehensive work examines significant American Jews, Jewish culture in America, and more from the country's earliest days of settlement up through contemporary times.

Schoen, *Carol, Anzia Yezierska,* Twayne Publishers, 1982.

Schoen presents an overview of Yezierska's literary career.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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